



Scientific facts

European Policy for languages

NUREMBERG RECOMMENDATIONS ON EARLY FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

Developmental psychology and language acquisition

Humans are oriented towards language even before birth. Infants adjust intuitively to the speech melody of their surroundings. Their very first imitations of sound combinations are communicative acts.

From about the second year of life, language acquisition becomes conscious. Language and thought converge. Self-centred in play, but remaining always in continuous social interaction, the child forms an image of the world and in doing so also acquires the ordering structures of language. The child's continued linguistic, cognitive and emotional development will depend on his or her social and cultural situation and on whether he or she is perceived as an individual and treated by others in ways appropriate to his or her needs, inclinations and capabilities.

Recommendations:

According to the particular developmental stage that the child has reached, the following recommendations for the foreign language learning process may be noted:

- Children's spontaneity and lack of inhibition make them exceptionally capable of enthusiasm and quick to join in playful activity. Their normal abundance of curiosity, their urge to explore, readiness to learn and capacity to absorb should

all be turned to good use in the form of practical, activity oriented learning and experimentation.

- Children are strongly focused on the here and now, on direct, tangible experience. In a non-target-language environment they need to be motivated in ways that make sense to them.
- If children are to understand, material must be presented to them in terms of tangible realities that they can visualise. Until they have reached a certain age, they cannot cope with abstract concepts. Situational and action-linked stimulus material and learning procedures are accordingly of key importance for their learning attainment and their pleasure in learning.
- Children are able to concentrate for short periods; playful means should be sought to address and further develop their usually good memory powers.
- Children's fundamentally open-minded attitude invites an engagement with intercultural topics.

The child's linguistic development

It is now accepted that "human beings are capable of learning one or more new languages at any time. However, findings from research on language acquisition and from brain research have produced evidence that the acquisition of an unfamiliar language should take place as early as possible. It has been shown, for instance, that children up to the age of six can learn to speak a second language without an accent. Up to the age of puberty, syntax and morphology can be acquired with less effort than subsequently."¹⁴ However, many other factors also have a bearing on children's learning attainment. These include the quality of the teaching staff and the materials used, and the duration and intensity of the language contact.

Recommendations

- During the language learning process, the child should be given sufficient opportunities to try out newly learnt material in social interaction, e.g. with the teacher or with fellow pupils.

- The realisation that language acquisition is clearly a phased process entails a rethink on the issue of errors arising during language-learning: errors are now seen to be development steps along the path of language acquisition: that is to say, they are a legitimate subspect of the learning process, and as such should be dealt with patiently and tactfully.
- Practitioners and teachers should see errors as valuable evidence of the stage that the language acquisition process has reached, and use them to help in giving the child continued support.

The child's needs

- to feel safe and secure while in the learning environment
- to receive affection and be able to show affection
- to express feelings, be happy, and make others happy
- to communicate with others, to express thoughts and feelings
- to play, be active, move, romp about
- to express him- or herself creatively
- to experience successes and be praised
- to encounter new things by experience, by learning, by discovery, or through conscious research
- to re-run new experiences and insights in role-play (or similar) and thus assimilate these emotionally.

Linguistically qualified pre-primary staff and language teachers

The key role in early foreign language learning is that of early years practitioners and primary education teachers. Next to the parents, they are the most important contact persons in the child's life; and they have crucial influence both on the prevalent atmosphere in the learning environment and on the detailed character of the child's daily circumstances. The better qualified the practitioner or teacher in terms of the many and varied – and highly specific – professional requirements, the more successful the child's learning will be.

Certain transferable knowledge and experience-based qualifications are also important.

These include:

- natural enjoyment of communication
- capacity and desire for intercultural communication • capacity for analytical, problem-oriented thought
- competence in identifying, mediating and implementing learning strategies
- endorsement of lifelong learning as a principle for oneself and all learners
- ability to inspire openness to new ways of thinking and learning
- ability to cooperate as harmoniously and productively with colleagues as with children
- constant upgrading of own media competence
- self-confident and intelligently purposive approach in fulfillment of own professional role and responsibilities together with maintenance of critical perspective
- unfailing readiness to cooperate with all involved in upbringing of children and in education.

Parents

Although a certain anxiety still surfaces from time to time among parents, and indeed teachers, to the effect that children may be overstretched by starting too early on the learning of foreign languages, most parents now see early language learning programmes as an opportunity for their children. Parents are for the most part aware that the early start has been shown to bring the child clear advantages in learning one or more additional languages faster and with less effort.

Recommendations

Parents should:

- be kept informed about the aims and content of early foreign language learning and also about the underlying principles of the psychology of learning, in language appropriate to the recipient. They should be informed regularly about the development and progress of their child. This is essential if they are to adequately understand, follow and assist the learning process.

- clearly signal their interest in their child's early foreign language learning by enquiring, encouraging, praising in response to successes, and discussion. Any prompting of the child to demonstrate learning achievements – orally or visually – should be solely to convey genuine interest, never for assessment purposes.
- not attempt to influence their children's learning process by corrections to their work. Correction of errors should be the prerogative and responsibility of practitioners and teachers, who will introduce corrections only in a precisely targeted approach and with restraint, so as not to undermine the child's confidence and disrupt the fluency of spoken delivery.
- take up, whenever possible, any opportunities to cooperate (parent evenings, briefing events, school celebrations etc.) and also voluntarily seek cooperation with teaching staff – subject, however, to the obligation on each side to respect the responsibilities and prerogatives of the other.

General Competences

Development of general competences – such as e.g. self-competence and social competence – does not occur in isolation from that of other competences, and is accordingly an important concern during early foreign language learning.

In the context of any early foreign language programme, efforts should be made to foster the development of the following general competences:

- **Self-competence:** By way of achievements and insights gained during acquisition of a foreign language, the child enhances his sense of self, learns to assess and esteem himself and his personal role inside a group, and develops the courage to take action.
- **Social competence:** Sound self-assessment leads to a just perception of the other group members. The child perceives the others as individuals in their own right, learns to value each of them individually, works as part of a team, develops a we-consciousness.
- **Affective competence:** In daily contact with others, the child learns to express feelings and to recognise conflicts and problems, and also comes to know the routes that may lead to the solution of a problem.

- **Motor competence:** Physical movement during the learning process is a fundamental childhood need, enhances receptiveness, and fosters the child's motor development.
- **Cognitive competence:** The foreign language becomes a medium of communication, less of an end in itself. Foreign language content items prompt reflective thought and enhance memory performance. This competence develops at earliest when a child has reached the age of about ten.
- **Creative competence:** Unfamiliar sounds and symbols, and new and unaccustomed content, arouse pleasure, stimulate curiosity, open up new ideas, and prompt the child to test out new approaches.
- **The competence of close attention:** new influences sensitise the child to our immediate surroundings, to our environment, to the needs and necessities to which other human beings are subject. The competence of close attention leads to due recognition and respect, and also to trust.

Learning strategy competences

By virtue of personal preferences and aptitudes, every learner is a distinct learner type and can evolve his or her own learning techniques and learning strategies, which can be addressed in language classes, ideally in manner that is as specific to each learner as possible. Learning with all the senses means that the child becomes better at self-understanding, and observes the own learning behaviour, and this observation in turn teaches him or her how to learn a foreign language most effectively. If a child has been introduced to the widest possible range of learning strategies, he or she can identify preferences and at a later stage direct his or her learning process and pace autonomously. Learning strategies make the foreign language learning process easier and evidently engender a positive attitude to learning and using the foreign language. Benefit accrues for the learning of further languages

Principles relating to teaching procedures

- The learning processes of young learners of foreign languages should be play- and action-oriented.
- Rules and relationships should be recognised by the learners in examples, imitated and in some circumstances independently discovered (inductive or discovery learning).
- During all phases of teaching, the maximum possible number of different learning channels should be utilised so as to offer each learning type the optimal framework (multisensory/holistic learning by hearing, seeing, touching, smelling, reading, moving, speaking, writing, drawing).
- Learning processes should be facilitated by means of examples and illustrations; in task-setting, preferential setting of small-step and internally discriminating tasks supports the understanding-and-applying process.
- Frequent changes of social format (independent work, partner work, small-group and large-group work) and of teaching type ('workstation learning', learning scenarios, project work) ensures variety, thus keeping up interest and concentration.
- Differing methodologies (Total Physical Response, Narrative Approach method or similar) should be applied according to goals and content, and – when the learning situation permits – combined with one another.
- In the early foreign language programme, the child is not exhorted to speak, but begins by listening, then understanding and absorbing, and may often let a considerable time pass before eventually reacting by e.g. imitating individual words from the foreign language or inserting them into sentences in the mother tongue.